



Student Mobility
and Motivation

United States

Inbound and outbound
student perceptions

Powered by the QS International Student
Survey and Global Student Flows

2026

This report was developed with the support of the following QS team members, who contributed through research, analysis, content development, and expert review.

Alex Berka, Insights Manager

Louie Brand, Content Marketing Manager

Ben Webb, Executive Director, Americas

Global offices



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Foreword



Ben Webb
Executive Director, Americas
QS Quacquarelli Symonds

The United States remains one of the world's most influential higher education markets, both as a leading destination for international students and as an important source of globally mobile learners. The nation's institutions continue to be recognised for academic excellence, research strength, innovation and breadth of choice. Yet the environment in which students make decisions is becoming more complex, more competitive and more shaped by perceptions of value, outcomes and trust.

This report brings together student perception data and mobility forecasts to provide a clearer view of how the US sits within this changing landscape. For students considering the US, academic quality remains central, but career outcomes, post-study opportunities, networks and the overall student experience are increasingly important to how they assess value. At the same time, US students considering study abroad are showing strong interest in destinations and institutions that can offer cultural experience, lifestyle appeal, personal development and clear, responsive communication.

For US institutions, it's now clear that broad reputation alone is not enough. Students are comparing options across a growing range of destinations, channels and sources of influence. They expect information that is timely, relevant and easy to act on. They want confidence that the institution understands their priorities, whether that means career opportunity, affordability, visa access, student support, teaching quality or the experience of living and studying in a particular place.

The data in this report is designed to help institutions move from assumption to evidence. By combining the QS International Student Survey with Global Student Flows insight, it offers a rounded view of where demand is moving, what students value and how institutions can communicate with greater precision. In a market where competition for student attention is intensifying, those insights matter.

This is a challenging moment for international recruitment, but it is also a moment of opportunity. Institutions that understand changing student expectations, strengthen their recruitment pipelines and communicate their value clearly will be better placed to grow sustainably. QS is here to support that work, helping universities navigate complexity, identify opportunity and engage students in ways that are timely, relevant and useful.



Turn Insights Into Recruitment Results

Find, engage and recruit more of your ideal students

How we can help:

- Make confident market decisions
- Increase admissions resilience
- Strengthen your recruitment pipeline
- Convert interest into enrolments

1,500+

universities worldwide trust us to grow and diversify their student cohorts

14,000+

compliance checks delivered over the past five years

50,000+

students engaged through QS recruitment events

Discover what's possible with QS

[Explore our student recruitment solutions](#)

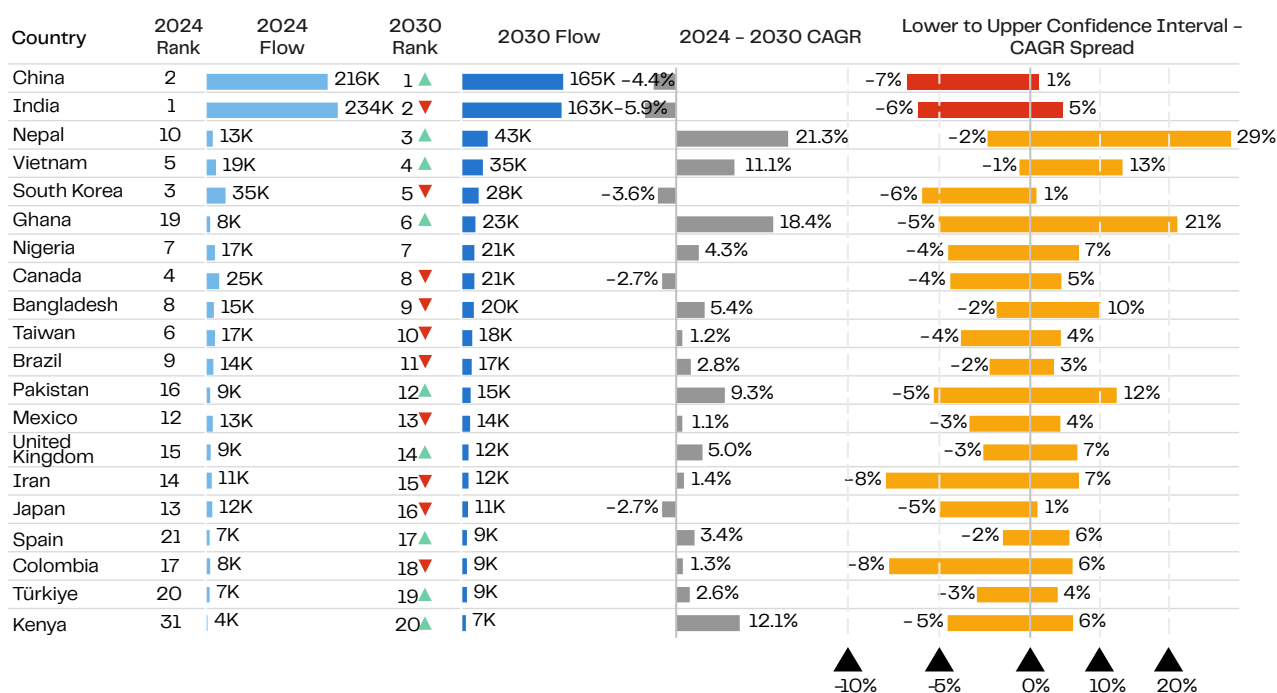


United States: Market Overview

Inbound Mobility Trends

In the 2025 Global Student Flows: United States report, we forecast the number of international students studying in the US will decline by 1% annually through 2030. This trend follows years of stagnation, especially when excluding Optional Practical Training (OPT) figures. China and India are projected to have a CAGR of -4.4% and -5.9% respectively, but are set to remain the top two source markets (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Top 20 Source Countries to the US, 2024-2030F



Source: QS Global Student Flows, January 2026

Outbound Mobility Trends

Outbound US student mobility is rebounding, and is the sixth leading source market for international students. Over 150,000 Americans pursued higher education overseas in 2024, with numbers projected to exceed 200,000 by 2030. Mexico, the UK, and Spain, France and Germany are the primary destinations for American students.

Read more in

Global Student Glows: United States



Executive Summary

The US international education market is entering a new, more challenging era. Inbound demand remains substantial, but QS Global Student Flows forecasts a modest 1% annual decline in international student numbers through 2030. China and India are still expected to remain the largest source markets despite projected contractions. At the same time, outbound US mobility is recovering, with more than 200,000 American students projected to study overseas by 2030.

For US-bound students, academic quality remains the foundation of appeal, but it is no longer enough on its own. High-quality teaching is the leading decision driver, while the fastest-rising factors since 2022 are post-study work rights, graduate employment and professional networks. To capture a shrinking domestic and international market, reputation must be translated into outcomes. Prospective students need to see how a US education will support their academic ambitions, career prospects and long-term networks, especially as affordability appears to be declining in relative importance.

The outbound picture is different. US students considering study abroad are motivated most strongly by lifestyle, culture and the wider personal value of an international experience. Academic quality and institutional reputation still matter, but the growth in visa-related concerns and interest in personal and professional networks suggests that destination confidence, practical guidance and trusted human contact are increasingly important to decision making. Institutions outside the US that can combine a compelling student experience with clear, accessible information will be better placed to capture this growing demand.

Across both inbound and outbound audiences, the student journey is becoming more immediate, more digital and more validation-led. Official university websites remain the primary source of information, but students are also placing greater weight on search, social media, admissions staff, peer voices, alumni and family or friend recommendations. Speed also matters, with US-bound students are expecting faster application decisions, while outbound students still expect timely, personalized responses to enquiries even when they are prepared to wait longer for admissions outcomes.

For institutions, the opportunity lies in moving from broad market messaging to more precise, evidence-led engagement. In the US, this means demonstrating employability, networks and responsiveness alongside academic strength. For global institutions recruiting American students, it means making the destination experience tangible while removing uncertainty from the decision process. In both cases, institutions that align program messaging, digital discovery, enquiry handling and conversion activity to what students now value will be better positioned to compete in an increasingly complex mobility landscape.

Inbound Trends

What do US-bound students
want from institutions?



US Inbound Trends At a Glance

Where Are Students Coming From?

Top Markets by 2030



1% annual decrease in international student numbers through 2030

What Do They Want to Study?

Top Subjects in 2026

#1

Business & Management 21%

#2 Engineering & Technology 16%

#3 Computing 10.6%

#4 Social Sciences 5.5%

#5 Subjects Allied to Medicine 5.2%

Biggest Changes Since 2022



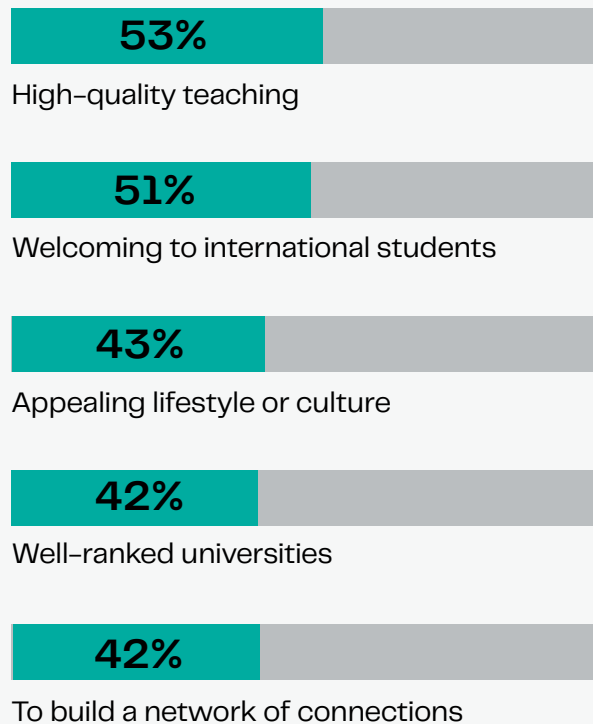
Subjects Allied to Medicine:
+2.2% since 2022



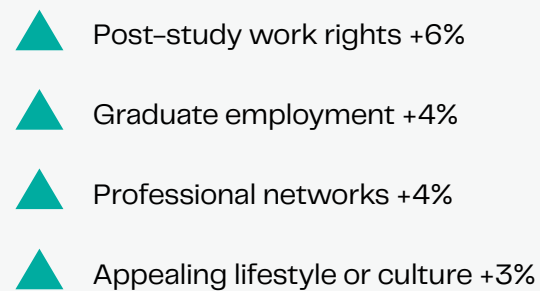
Business & Management interest
has risen by 1.9% since 2022

What do US-Bound Students Want?

Top Decision Drivers in 2026 when choosing a country



Fastest-Rising Factors Since 2022



How Quick Do Students Expect Responses?

19% expect an application outcome within 24 hours

34% expect responses within 3 days or less

Most Influential Information Sources

72% Official university website

52% Online search

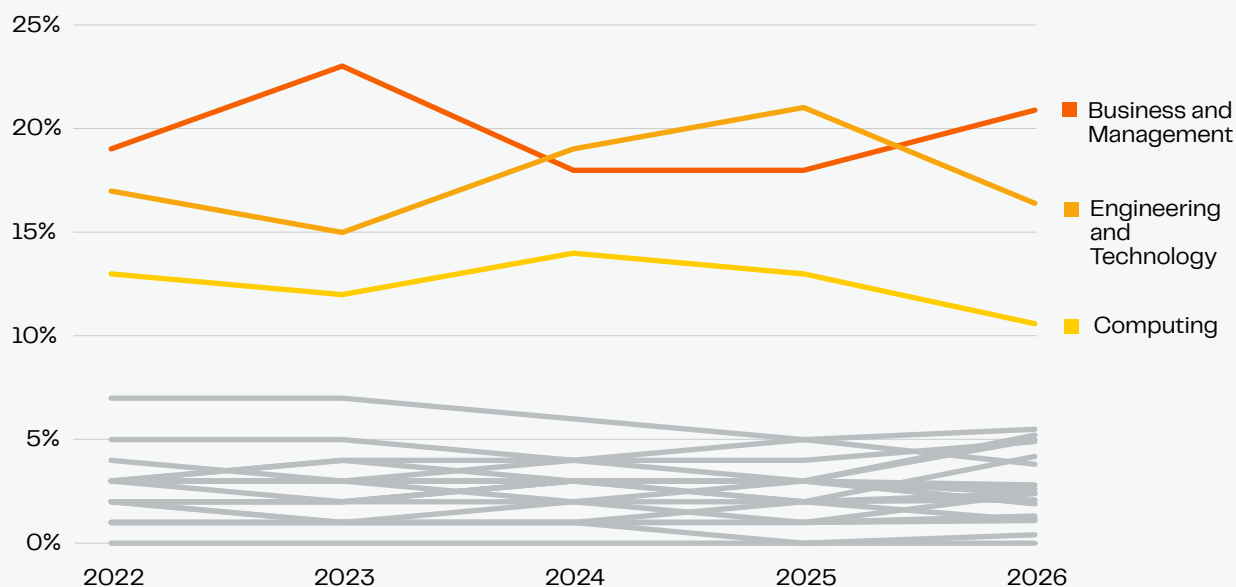
50% Rankings

44% Social media

38% University fairs

Subject-level Interest

Figure 2. What Do US-Bound Students Want to Study?



Source: QS International Student Survey

After two years, Business and Management has reclaimed top spot as the most popular subject for students looking to study in the US. Engineering and Technology returns to second place with 16.4%. Computing completes the top three but has seen declining interest since 2022.

Interest in other subjects has remained largely flat, with no other subject reaching 10%. The biggest risers since 2022 are Subjects allied to Medicine (+2.2pp), Business and Management (+1.9pp) and Law (+1.2pp).

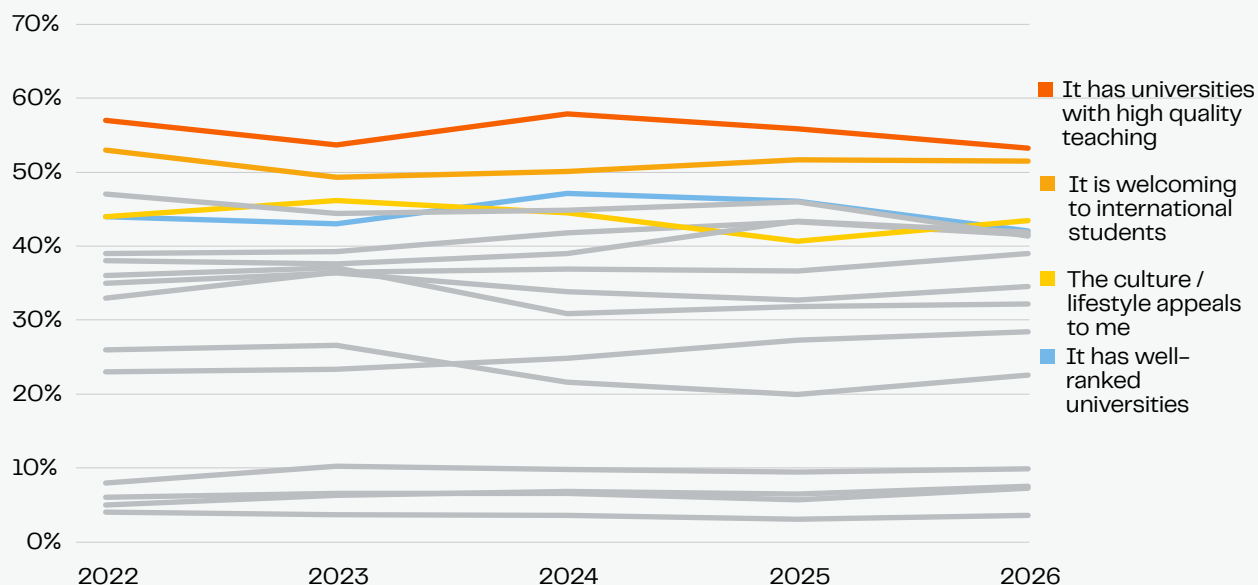
These trends align with other QS metrics:

- The US' Ivy League institutions have improved their median rank in Business by 4.5 in the last three years, up to 25.5. In Engineering and Technology, on the other hand, the Ivy League's median rank moved down by 7 in 2026.
- The declining interest in Computing aligns with a decline in ranking performance. In the last three years, the US average Median Rank in Computer Science has declined by 212.



What Drives Inbound Mobility?

Figure 3. US Inbound Mobility: Important Factors When Choosing a Country



Source: QS International Student Survey

Students choose the US primarily for academic quality and career outcomes. In 2026, the top drivers are high-quality teaching, welcoming to international students, well-ranked universities, good graduate employment options, and network building. Of these, only network building and graduate employment options have increased in importance since 2022, speaking to a wider trend of career-led factors increasing.

Post-study work visa appeal rose from 33% to 39%, graduate employment rose from 39 to 43% and network building increased from 38% to 42%. Cost is becoming less of a factor, with affordable cost of living falling from 36% to 32%, while affordable study stayed flat at 35%.

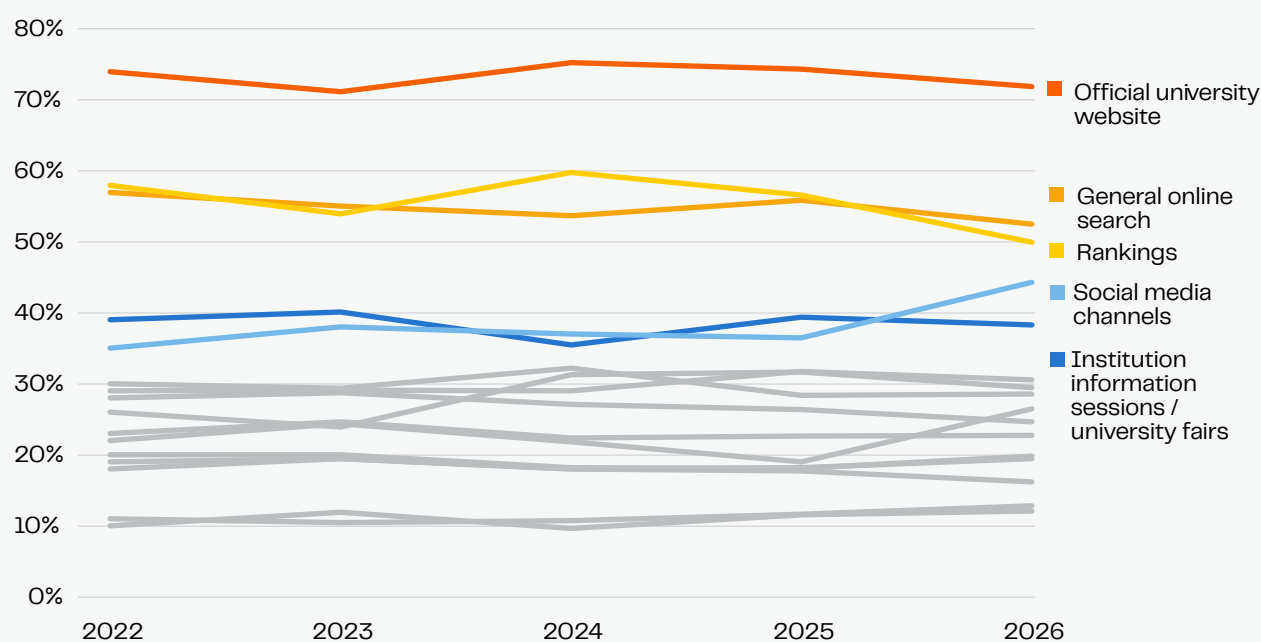
Overall, the US proposition is becoming less about affordability and more about quality, employability, networks, and post-study opportunity.

Key Questions to Consider:

- Are your program marketing priorities aligned with where student demand is growing?
- Are you demonstrating career outcomes as clearly as academic reputation?
- Does your student marketing reinforce the messages that resonate most?

The Sources Inbound Students Use to Find Information About the US

Figure 4. US Inbound Mobility: Top Sources of Information



Source: QS International Student Survey

The official university website remains the dominant information source in 2026, followed by general online search and rankings, though all have seen their importance decrease since 2022. University fairs continue to be a prominent information source, remaining stable since 2022.

The biggest shift is toward social media, up 9pp since 2022, and education agents, up 5%. US inbound research continues to be website and search-led, but influence is shifting toward social, agents, and peer/alumni channels.

Key Questions to Consider:

- Is your website and social media localised to account for international students in high-growth markets, like Nepal, Ghana, Vietnam and Kenya?
- Is your international search engine optimisation effective?
- Are you using student and alumni voices effectively to build trust across the channels students rely on most?

Student Conversion and Communication

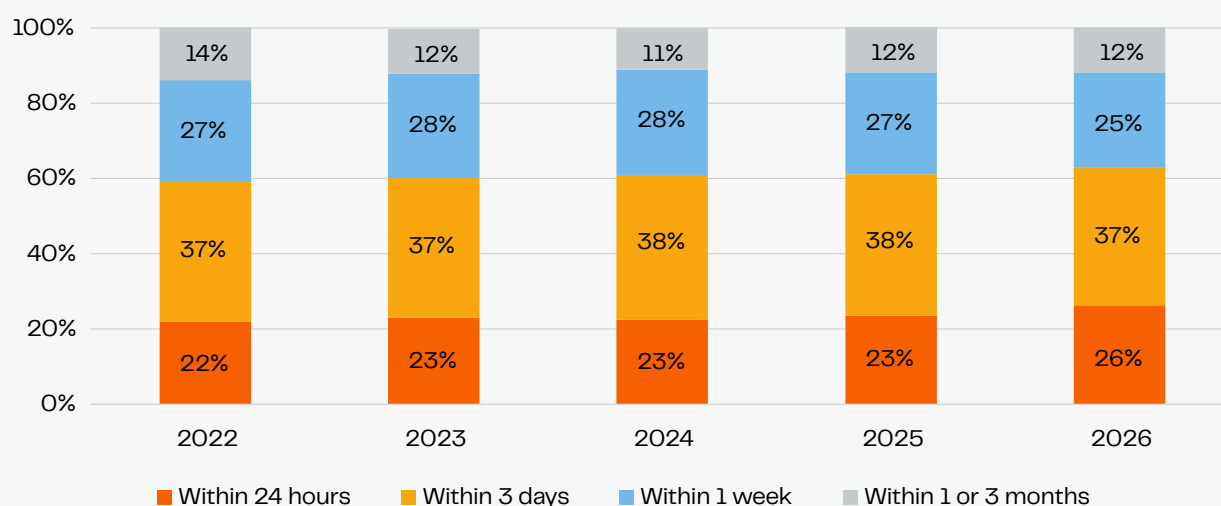
US-bound students are increasingly expecting quicker responses. 26% would expect a personalised response to an enquiry within 24 hours, up from 22% in 2022. In 2026, 19% of US-bound students expect to know the outcome of their application within 24 hours, up from 14% in 2022. The share of students willing to wait a month for their application

outcome has dramatically dropped from 35% to 28% between 2025 and 2026. With 53% of US-bound students considering or applying to five or more universities, this places a premium on rapid response times. Any delay at the enquiry stage allows students to consider alternative options.

Key Questions to Consider:

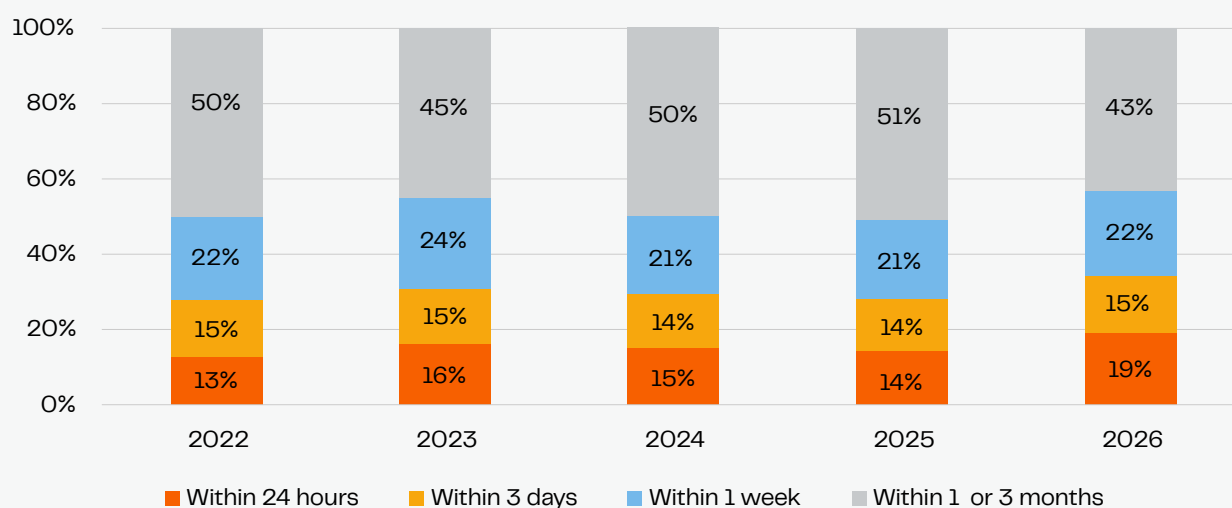
- Are your communications delivering the responsiveness and personalisation students now expect?
- As international student demand becomes more competitive, are you nurturing enquiries effectively enough to convert interest into applications and enrolments?
- Which touchpoints in the student journey have the greatest influence on conversion, and are you investing in them accordingly?

Figure 5. US Inbound Mobility: Expected Response Time For an Enquiry



Source: QS International Student Survey

Figure 6. US Inbound Mobility: Expected Time For Application Outcome Notification



Source: QS International Student Survey

Outbound Trends

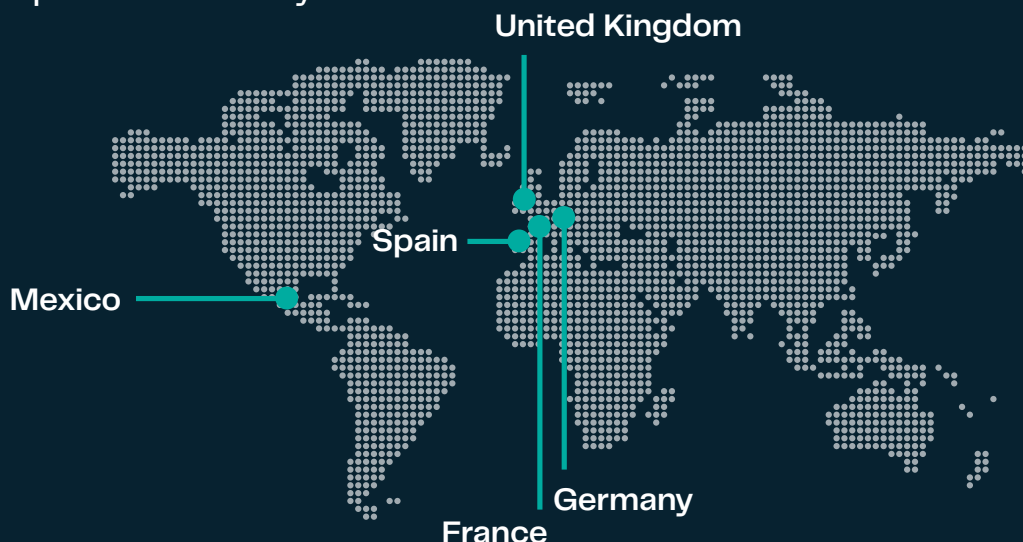
What do US students want from
global institutions?



Outbound Trends At a Glance

Where are US Students Going?

Top Destinations By 2030



Over 200,000 US students projected to study overseas by 2030

What Do They Want To Study?

Top Subjects In 2026

#1

Creative Arts & Design 11%

#=2 Social Sciences 9%

#=2 Business & Management 9%

#=2 Historical, Philosophical & Religious

Fastest-Rising Subject Area

▲ Creative Arts & Design has overtaken other subjects following strong year-on-year growth

How Quick Do US Students Expect Responses?

86% expect a complete and personalised enquiry response within one week or less

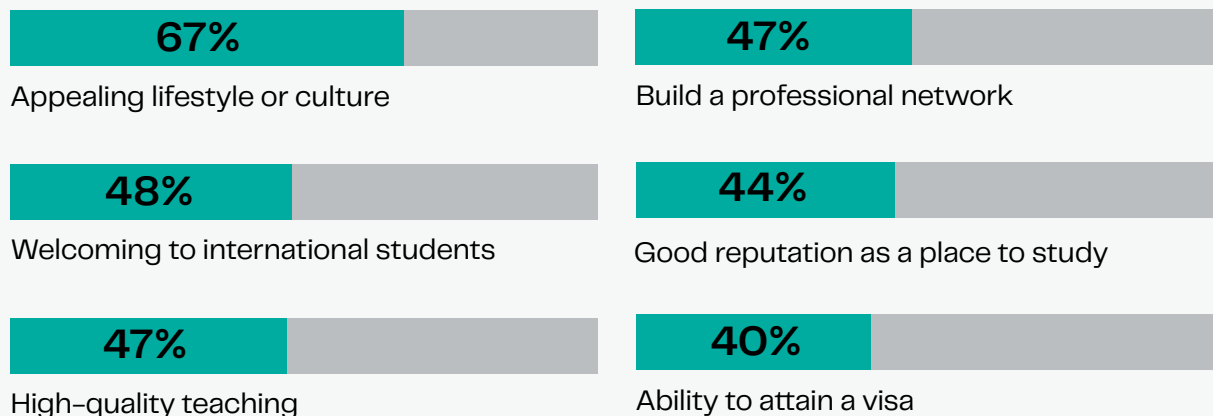
21% expect an application outcome within one week or less

41% are prepared to wait up to one month for an application outcome

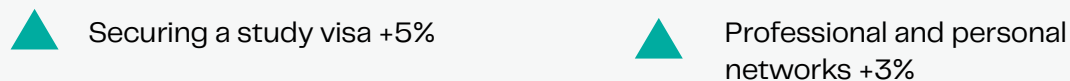
37% are prepared to wait up to three months

What Do US Students Seeking Study Overseas Want?

Top Decision Drivers In 2026

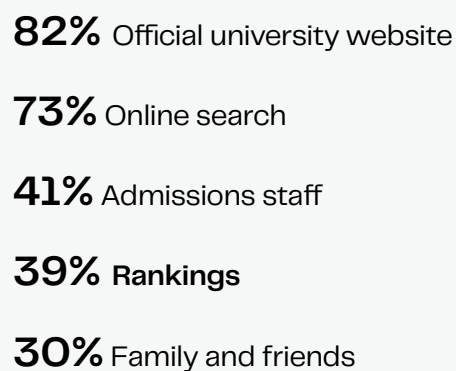


Fastest-Rising Factors Since 2022

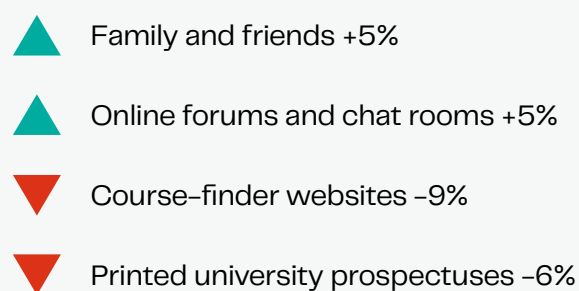


How Do They Make Decisions?

Most Influential Information Sources In 2026



Biggest Information-Source Shifts Since 2022

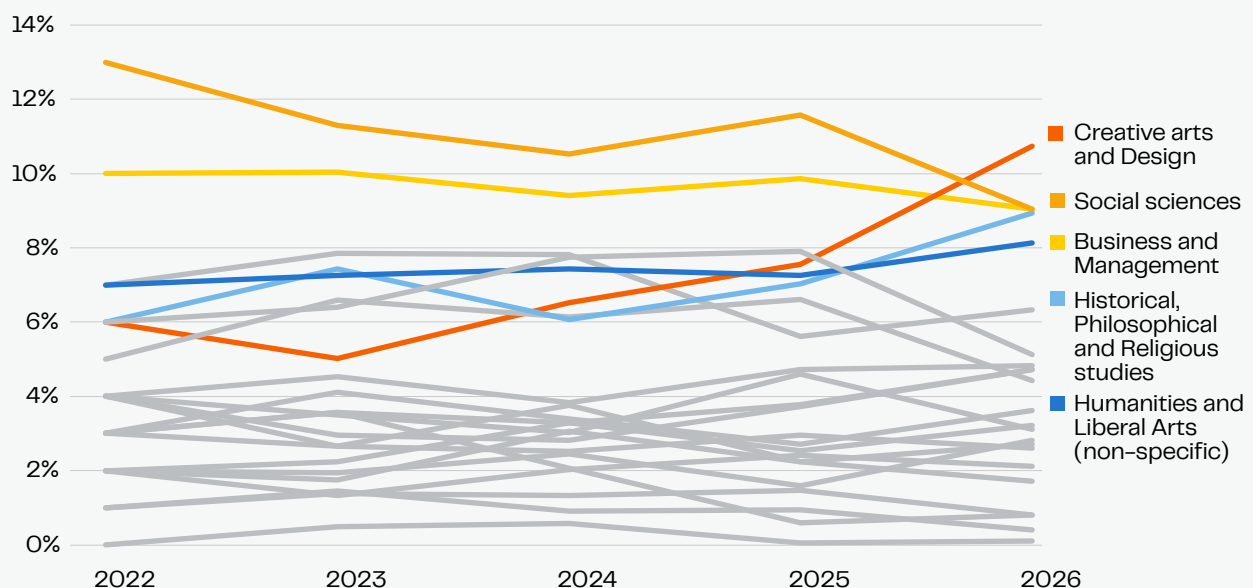


Subject-level Interest

American student interest is becoming more diversified, with only one subject of interest to more than 10% of students. Creative Arts & Design has overtaken all other subjects to become the leading choice among US students considering study abroad, following strong year-on-year growth. Social

Sciences and Business & Management, which dominated student preferences in recent years, have both fallen to 9%, level with Historical, Philosophical & Religious Studies at a four-year high. Most other subjects have seen little movement and continue to attract single-digit levels of interest.

Figure 7. What Do American Students Want to Study Abroad?



Source: QS International Student Survey

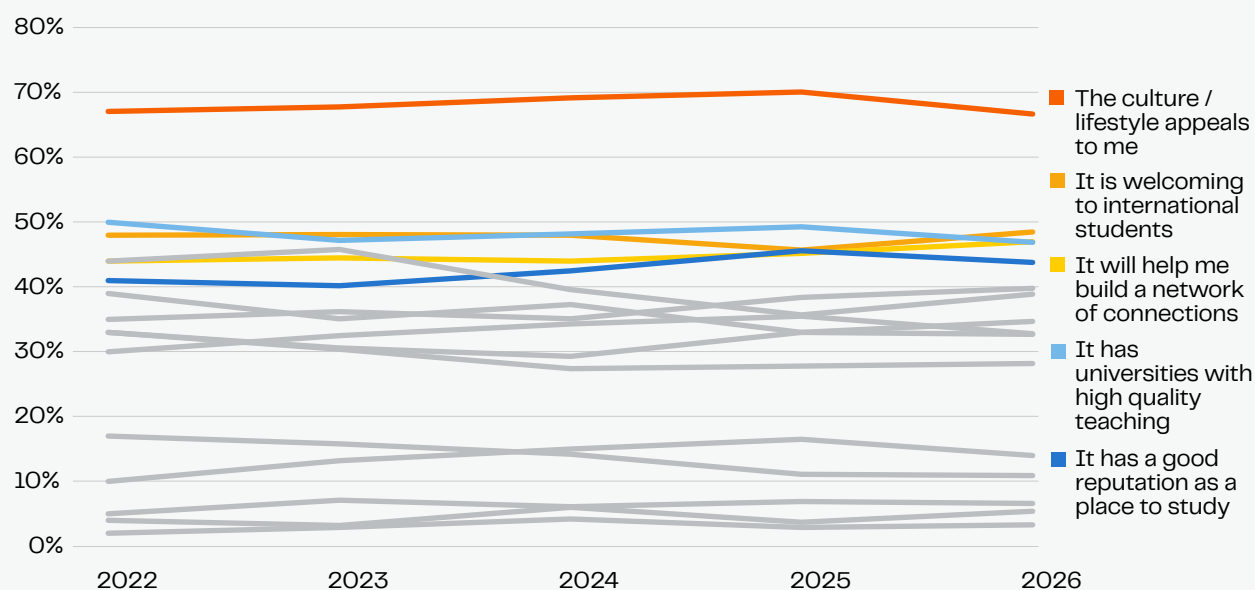
Key Questions to Consider:

- Increasing numbers of American students are set to study abroad by 2030. Is your program portfolio aligned to their interests?
- How are you marketing your creative or cultural subjects to American students?
- Do your subject-level marketing messages align to the factors they deem important?



What Drive Outbound Mobility?

Figure 8. US Outbound Mobility: Important Factors When Choosing a Country

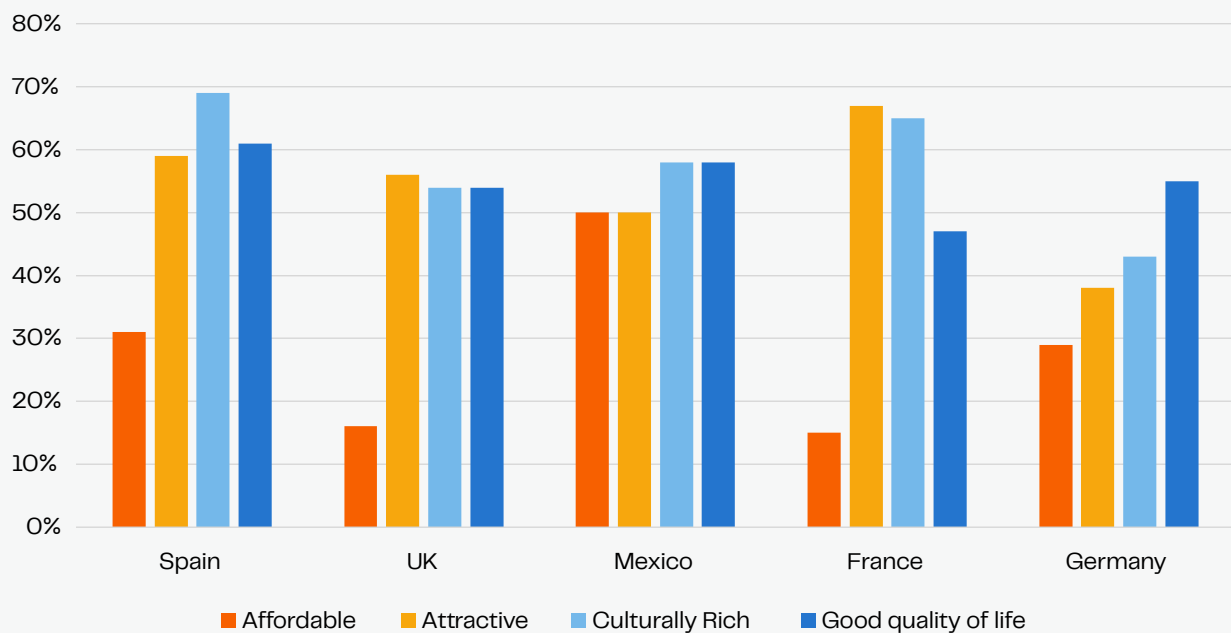


Source: QS International Student Survey

The appeal of an international lifestyle remains the strongest driver of study abroad decisions for US students, closely reflecting the perceptions of their most popular destinations, including Mexico, the UK, Spain, France and Germany. As outbound mobility is projected to grow through 2030, institutions competing for US students will need to demonstrate not only academic quality, but also the cultural, personal and social benefits of studying abroad.

Among the leading destinations for US outbound students, affordability appears to be a differentiator rather than a decisive barrier. Mexico stands out as the only destination strongly associated with affordability, at 50%, while the UK and France score much lower at 16% and 15% respectively. Yet both remain among the top destinations, suggesting that US students desire for by cultural richness, destination appeal and quality of life outweighs cost alone.

Figure 9. US Student Perception of Top Study Destinations



Source: QS International Student Survey

However, student priorities are evolving. Since 2022, the importance of securing a study visa has increased by five percentage points, while the opportunity to build professional and personal networks has risen by three points. By contrast, graduate employment outcomes

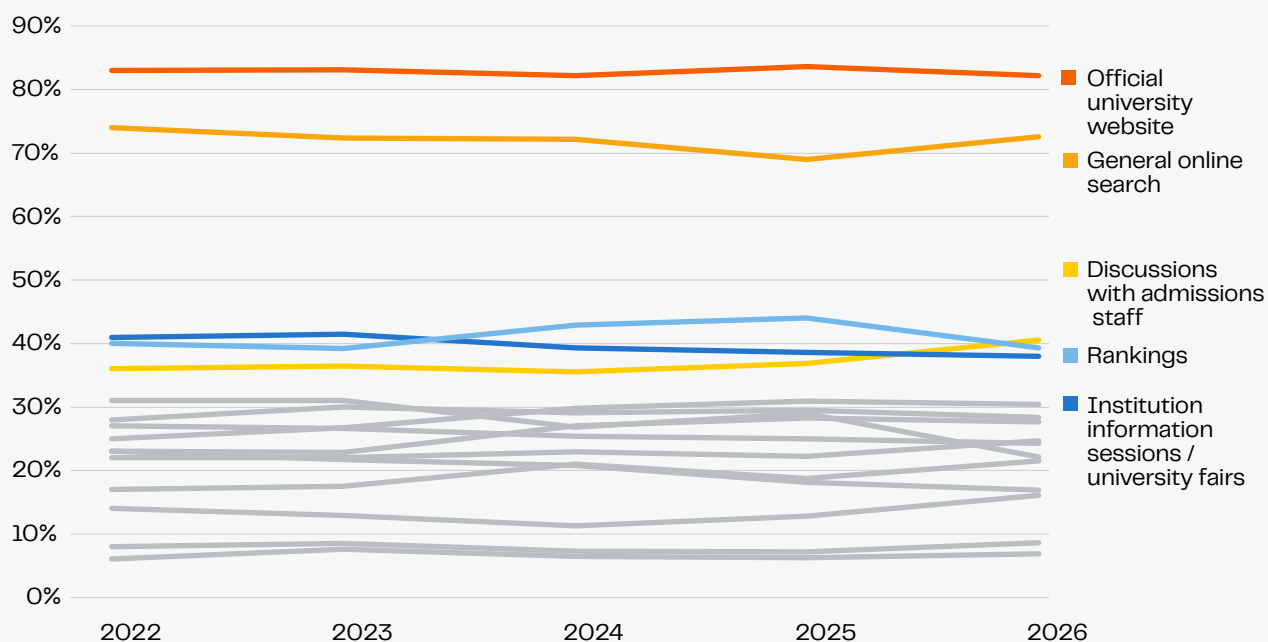
have become less important, suggesting many American students view international education as a means of broadening their experience rather than securing long-term migration or employment opportunities abroad.

Key Questions to Consider:

- As more US students look overseas, does your institutional proposition clearly differentiate your destination, campus experience and student lifestyle?
- Are you communicating practical considerations such as visa processes, student support and ease of access alongside academic strengths?
- How effectively are you demonstrating the networking, cultural and personal development opportunities that US students increasingly value from an international education experience?

The Sources of Information Students Use to Make Decisions

Figure 10. US Outbound Mobility: Top Sources of Information



Source: QS International Student Survey

US outbound students continue to rely most heavily on institution-owned and search-led channels, but the clearest movement since 2022 is toward more personal, conversational and peer-informed sources. The official university website remains the dominant research source, used by 82% of US outbound prospects in 2026, only slightly

below 83% in 2022. General online search also remains very high at 73%, down from 74%, suggesting that broad digital discovery is still central but no longer where the strongest growth is happening. Rankings are similarly stable, moving from 40% to 39%, which indicates continued relevance but not rising dependence.

The biggest risers point to a more validation-led decision journey. Family and friends increased from 25% to 30%, making it the strongest upward mover. Online forums and chat rooms rose from 23% to 28%, while discussions with admissions staff and alumni both increased by around 4pp. US outbound students are increasingly seeking reassurance, lived experience and direct answers from people they trust.

The biggest declines are mostly in more static or transactional sources. Course-finder websites fell from 31% to 22% (-9%), the sharpest drop, while printed university prospectuses declined from 23% to 17% (-6%). While still popular, institution information sessions and university fairs also slightly dropped, and non-institution higher education websites fell from 27% to 24% (-3%). These channels are still used, but their relative influence appears to be weakening compared with sources that provide personalised, peer-led or direct institutional engagement.

Key Questions to Consider:

- Is your official website working hard enough as a central conversion hub?
- Beyond the university's own voice, how are you building trust among key stakeholders?
- Admissions staff are a useful information source for 41% of students. Are those teams used as a strategic nurture channel, not just a service function?

Student Conversion and Communication

US outbound students appear more tolerant of longer admissions timelines than students in other major markets, but this should not be interpreted as a lower need for timely communication. In 2026, 86% expect a complete and personalised response to an enquiry within one week or less, a figure that has remained broadly stable since 2022 (Figure 11). This reinforces the importance of speed and relevance at the first point of contact, particularly for institutions competing to convert early-stage interest.

Expectations become more flexible once students reach the application stage. Just 21% of US students expect to receive an application outcome within a week or less, while 41% are prepared to wait up to one

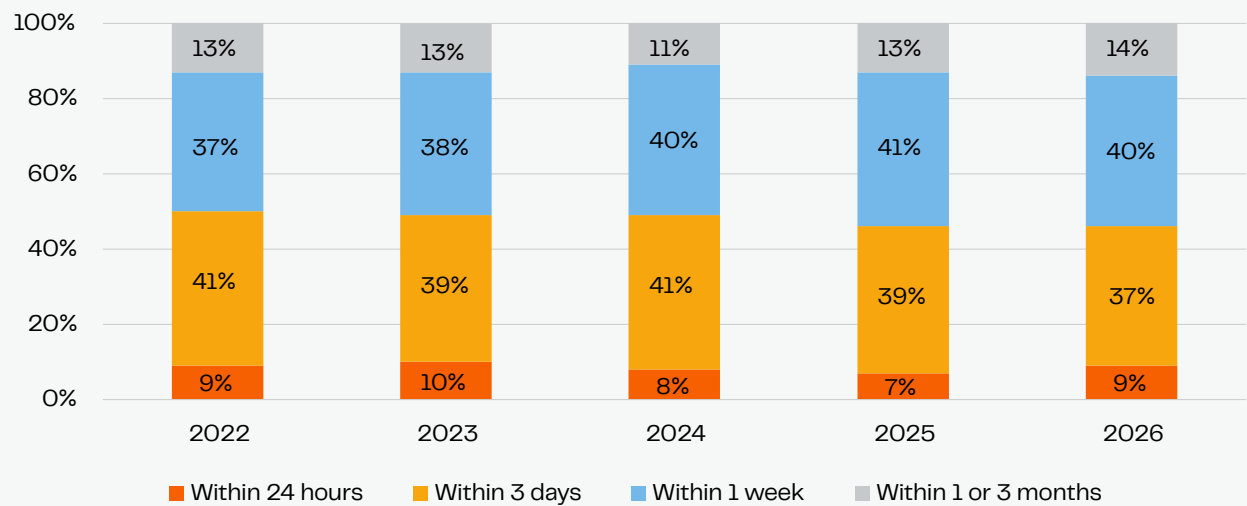
month and 37% up to three months. This contrasts sharply with China, where 71% expect an outcome within a week or less and only 6% are willing to wait three months. Indian students sit between these two markets, with 65% expecting a decision within a week and 9% willing to wait three months (Figure 12).

To recruit US students effectively, the journey must be managed with clarity and consistency. Prompt, personalised enquiry handling should be paired with proactive updates and relevant nurture communications throughout longer decision windows, helping maintain engagement and reduce the risk of students shifting attention to competing institutions.

Key Questions to Consider:

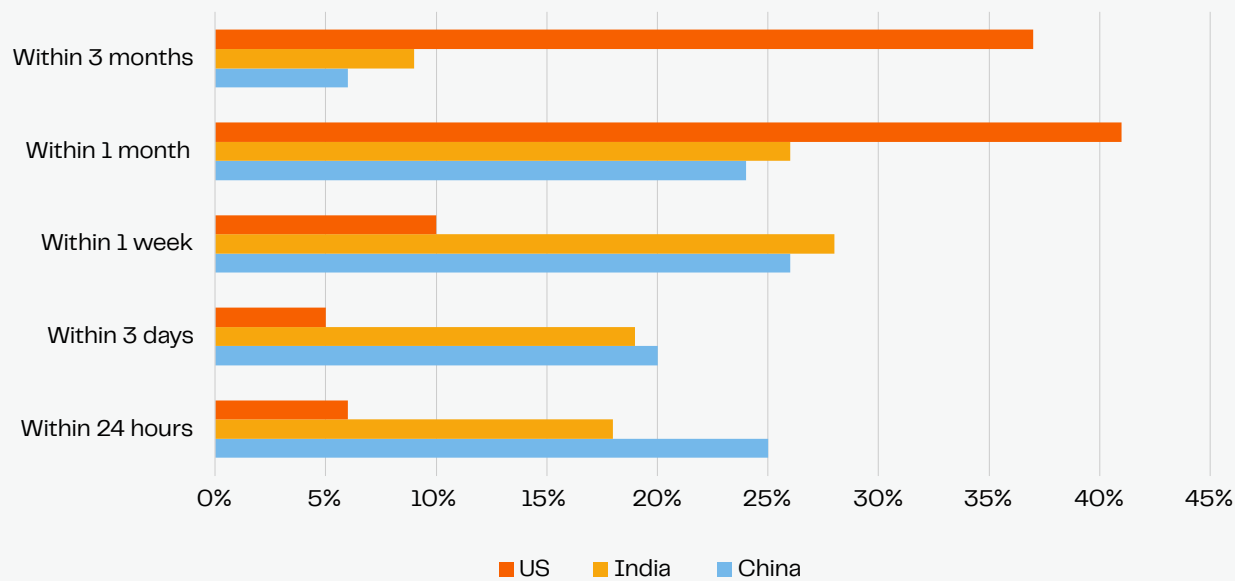
- Are your enquiry response processes fast and personalised enough to meet US students' expectations at the earliest stage of engagement?
- Where application decisions take longer, are you using proactive updates and relevant content to maintain momentum and reduce drop-off?
- Are your response-time benchmarks differentiated by market, rather than assuming students from different markets have the same expectations?

Figure 11. US Outbound Mobility: Expectation of Time To Receive a Complete and Personal Response to an Enquiry



Source: QS International Student Survey

Figure 12. Application Outcome Response Time Expectations Outbound students from the US, India and China



Source: QS International Student Survey





Methodology

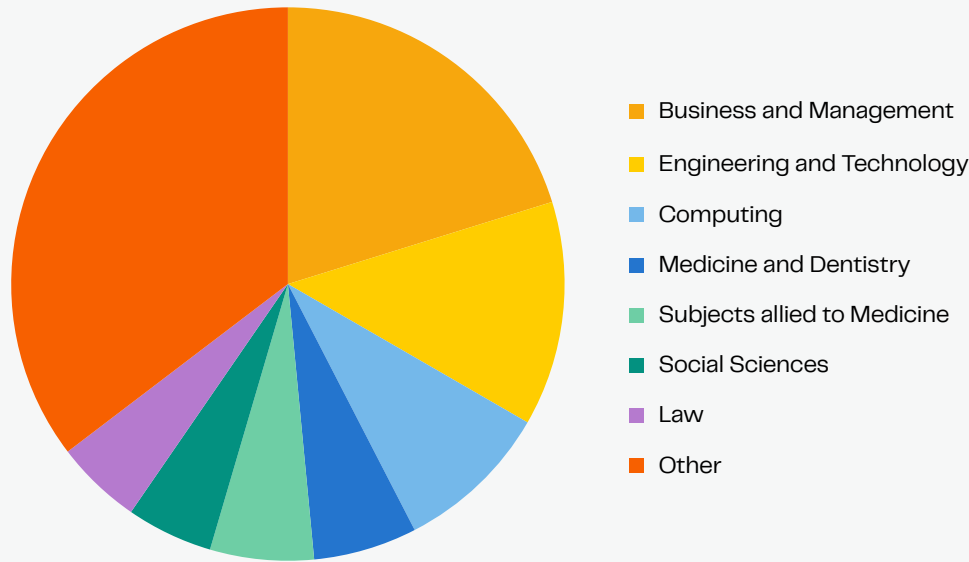
The QS International Student Survey offers an unparalleled view into pre-enrolled international students. The 2026 iteration draws on responses from over 42,115 students in 191 locations, and this report uses over 500,000 responses from the past 5 years.

The questions in the Survey are designed to enable higher education institutions to make sound decisions on recruitment and communication strategies. Now combined with Global Student Flows data, we offer a well-rounded view of where students are choosing to study, and how they make that decision. To understand what matters to students, we ask a wide range of questions about their pre-enrolment journey. We want to know what students prioritise when choosing a location, university and course, and we want to understand what they perceive as high quality teaching. We ask students how their family influence decision making, and we gather data on the social media and digital channels they use to find study information. The International Student Survey also benefits from its longevity – 2026 is our 14th edition. The consistency in our questioning allows us to see how students' answers change over time, and predict future trends and shifts. Its yearly format allows us to add new questions to get a snapshot of student perception.

The International Student Survey's robust methodology ensures we truly represent the perception of pre-enrolled international students. Respondents for the International Student Survey are collected in partnership with global universities. This year, we partnered with 82 universities globally, who were invited to share the Survey with their own prospective international students. Fieldwork for the Survey was conducted between January 5 and April 6 2026, via Qualtrics, an online survey management platform. The Survey contains 50 unique questions, covering a range of topics relating to prospective student decision making, from their study background to their priorities, marketing communication preferences, through to their principal information sources, career aspirations, and post-study plans. The 2026 iteration of the Survey also contains questions on candidate perceptions of different locations as study destinations. Each institution who took part received a tailored benchmarking report detailing the results of their own prospective students.

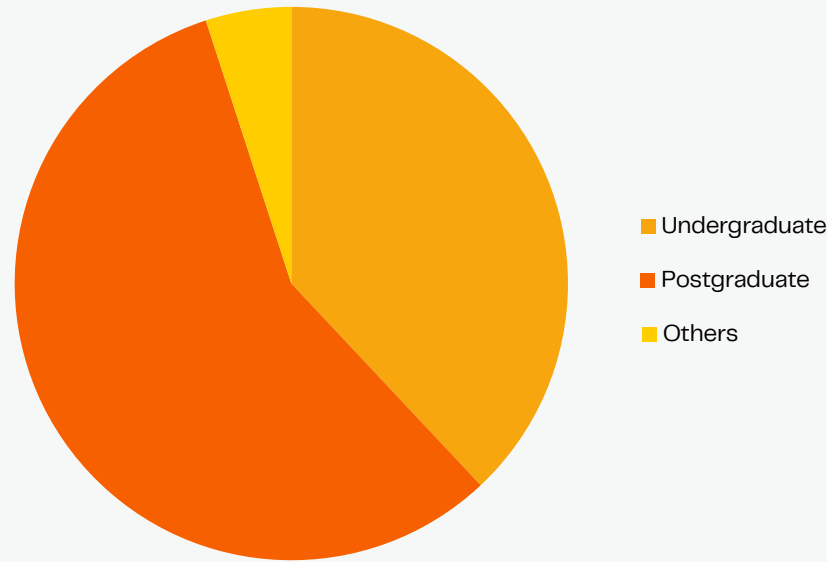
International Student Survey Respondent Demographics

Subject Preference



Source: QS International Student Survey

Study Level



Source: QS International Student Survey

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